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ARNOLD BENNETT

# Essays of To-day and Yesterday

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ESSAYS OF  
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

ARNOLD  
BENNETT



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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE outstanding quality of Mr Arnold Bennett's writing is surely sincerity. Whether we agree with his conclusions or not we are bound to admit that, for him at least, they are true and well-founded. He never strikes an attitude nor does he beguile himself with self-deception. He recognizes the truth about himself so frankly that the sting is taken from retorts that would be damaging beyond repair were they addressed to a less ingenuous man. He calmly admits his self-sufficiency, for example, before you have time to frame the charge, so that there is nothing left to you but to marvel at candour so unusual and so unexpected. To his way of thinking there is nothing so dangerous as illusions, and his avowed aim is to slay them all wherever he may find them.

He never ceases to expound the significance of the commonplace. Many writers have busied themselves with the trivial and the sordid; not so many have shown that there is a deep meaning in the apparently trivial, and a beauty in that which is superficially sordid. It is just that significance which Mr Bennett seeks to reveal, whether he is describing the idiosyncrasies of Italian barbers or giving advice on the choice of a doctor. So he insists that "each man must be his own philosopher" and construct for himself a workable theory of existence.

Born in 1867 in the Potteries, he has studied law, has been a successful free-lance journalist, and finally

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has turned seriously to literature. He knows Fontainebleau as well as he knows his own "Five Towns," and he is interested in music and painting as well as in literature.

Thanks are due to Messrs Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., for permission to reprint "Serious Reading," from *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, "Running Away from Life," from *Self and Self-management*, and "Writing Novels," from *The Author's Craft*; and to Messrs Chatto and Windus for "W. W. Jacobs and Aristophanes," from *Books and Persons*, "Ill-health" and "The Barber," from *Things that have Interested Me*, First and Second Series, and "A Day's Sail," from *From the Log of the Velsa*.

F. H. P.

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# RUNNING AWAY FROM LIFE

## I

I WILL take the extreme case of the social butterfly, because it has the great advantage of simplicity. This favourite variety of the lepidopteral insects is always spoken of as female. But as the variety persists from generation to generation obviously it cannot be of one sex only. And, as a fact, there are indubitably male social butterflies, though the difference between the male and the female may be slight. I shall, however, confine myself to the case of the female social butterfly—again for the sake of simplicity.

This beautiful creature combines the habits of the butterfly with the habits of the moth. For whereas the moth flies only by night and the butterfly flies only by day, the social butterfly flies both by day and by night. She is universally despised and condemned, and almost universally envied: one of the strangest among the many strange facts of natural history. She lives with a single purpose—to be for ever in the movement—not any particular movement, but *the* movement, which is a grand combined tendency comprising all lesser tendencies. For the social butterfly the constituents of the movement are chiefly men, theatres, restaurants, dances, noise, and hurry. The minor constituents may and do frequently change, but the major constituents have not changed for a considerable number of years. The minor constituents of the movement are usually ‘serious,’ and hence in a minor way the social butterfly is serious. If books happen to be

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of the movement, she will learn the names of books and authors, and in urgent crises will even read. If music, she will learn to distinguish from all other sounds the sounds which are of the movement, the sounds at which she must shut her eyes in ecstasy and sigh. If social reform, she will at once be ready to reform everybody and everything except herself and her existence. If charity or mercifulness, she will be charitable or merciful according to the latest devices and in the latest frocks. Yes, and if war happens to be of the movement, she will be serious about the war.

You observe how sarcastic I am about the social butterfly. It is necessary to be so. The social butterfly never has since the earliest times been mentioned in print without sarcasm or pity, and she never will be. She is greatly to be pitied. What is her aim? Her aim, like the aim of most people except the very poor (whose aim is simply to keep alive), is happiness. But the unfortunate creature, as you and I can so clearly see, has confused happiness with pleasure. She runs day and night after pleasure—that is to say, after distraction; eating, drinking, posing, seeing, being seen, laughing, jostling, and the singular delight of continual imitation. She is only alive in public, and the whole of her days and nights are spent in being in public, or in preparing to be in public, or in recovering from the effects of being in public. Habit drives her on from one excitement to another. She flies eternally from something mysterious and sinister which is eternally overtaking her. You and I know that she is never happy—she is only intoxicated or narcotized by a drug that she calls pleasure. And her youth is going; her figure is going; her complexion is practically gone.

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She is laying up naught for the future save disappointment, dissatisfaction, disillusion, and no doubt rheumatism. And all this inordinate, incredible folly springs from a wrong and childish interpretation of the true significance of happiness.

### II

How much wiser, you say, and indeed we all say, is that other young woman who has chosen the part of content. She has come to terms with the universe. She is not for ever gadding about in search of something which she has not got, and which not one person in a hundred round about her has got. She has said: "The universe is stronger than I am. I will accommodate myself to the universe."

And she acts accordingly. She makes the best of her lot. She treats her body in a sane manner, and she treats her mind in a sane manner. She has perceived the futility of what is known as pleasure in circles where they play bridge and organize charity *fêtes* on the Field of the Cloth of Gold. She has frankly admitted that youth is fleeting, and that part of it must be spent in making preparations against the rigours of old age. She seeks her pleasure in literature and the arts because such pleasure strengthens instead of weakening the mind, and never palls. She is prudent. She is aware that there can be no happiness where duty has been left undone, and that loving-kindness is a main source of felicity. Hence she is attentive to duty, and she practises the altruism which is at once the cause and the result of loving-kindness. She deliberately cultivates cheerfulness and resignation; she discourages discontent as gardeners discourage a weed.

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She has duly noted that the kingdom of heaven is "within you," not near the band at the expensive restaurant, nor in the trying-on room of the fashionable dressmaker's next door to the expensive restaurant, nor in the *salons* of the well-advertised great. Her life is reflected in her face, which is a much better face than the face of the social butterfly. Whatever may occur—within reason—she is armed against destiny, married or single.

### III

What can there be in common between these two types? Well, the point I am coming to is that they may have one tragic similarity which vitiates their lives equally, or almost equally. One may be vastly more admirable than the other, and in many matters vastly more sensible. And yet they may both have made the same stupendous mistake: the misinterpretation of the significance of the word happiness. Towards the close of existence, and even throughout existence, the second, in spite of all her precautions, may suffer the secret and hidden pangs of unhappiness just as acutely as the first; and her career may in the end present itself to her as just as much a sham.

And for the same reason. The social butterfly was running after something absurd, and the other woman knew that it was absurd and left it alone. But the root of the matter was more profound. The social butterfly's chief error was not that she was running after something, but that she was running away from something—something which I have described as mysterious and sinister. And the other woman also may be—and as a fact frequently is—running away from just

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that mysterious and sinister something. And that something is neither more nor less than life itself in its every essence. Both may be afraid of life and may have to pay an equal price for their cowardice. Both may have refused to listen to the voice within them, and will suffer equally for the wilful shutting of the ear.

(It is true that the other woman may just possibly have a true vocation for a career of resignation and altruism, and the spreading of a sort of content in a thin layer over the entire length of existence. If so, well and good. But it is also true that the social butterfly may have a true vocation for being a social butterfly, and the thick squandering of a sort of pleasure on the earlier part of existence, to the deprivation of the latter part. Then neither the one nor the other will have been guilty of the cowardice of running away from life.)

My point is that you may take refuge in good works or you may take refuge in bad works, but that the supreme offence against life lies in taking refuge from it, and that if you commit this offence you will miss the only authentic happiness—which springs no more from content and resignation than it springs from mere pleasure. It is indisputable that the conscience can be, and is, constantly narcotized as much by relatively good deeds as by relatively bad deeds. Nevertheless, to dope the conscience is always a crime, and is always punished by the ultimate waking up of the conscience.

## IV

To take refuge from life is to refuse it. Life generally offers due scope for the leading instinct in a

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man or a woman; and sometimes it offers the scope at a very low price, at no price at all.

For example, a young man may have a very marked instinct for engineering, and his father may be a celebrated and wealthy engineer who is only too anxious that the son should follow the same profession. Life has offered the scope and charged nothing for it.

But, on the other hand, a man may have a very marked instinct for authorship, and his father may be a celebrated and wealthy engineer who, being convinced that literature is an absurd and despicable profession, has determined that his son shall not be an author but an engineer. "Become an engineer," says the father, "and I will give you unique help, and you are a made man. Become an author, and you get nothing whatever from me except opposition."

Life, however, which has provided the instinct for literature, has also provided the scope for its fulfilment. The scope for young authors is vaster to-day on two continents than ever it was. But the price which in this case life quotes is very high. The young man hesitates. The price quoted includes comfort, parental approval, domestic peace, money, luxury, and perhaps also a comfortable and not unsatisfactory marriage. It includes practically all the ingredients of the mixture commonly known as happiness. Of course, by following literature the young man may recover all and more than all the price paid. But also he may not. The chances are about a hundred to one that he will not. He is risking nearly everything in order to buy a ticket in a lottery.

Let us say that, being a prudent and obedient young fellow, he declines to beggar himself for a ticket in a

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lottery. His instinct towards literature has not developed very far; he sacrifices it and becomes the engineer. By industry and goodwill and native brains he becomes a very fair engineer, the prop of the firm, the aid, and in due course the successor, of his father. He treats his work-people well. He marries a delightful girl, and he even treats her well. He has delightful children. He is a terrific worldly success, and a model to his fellow-creatures. That man's attention to duty, his altruism, his real kindness, are the theme of conversation among all his friends. He treats his conscience with the most extraordinary respect.

And yet, if his instinct towards literature was genuine, he is not fundamentally happy, and when he chances to meet an author, or to read about authors (even about their suicides of despair), or to be deeply impressed by a book, he is acutely aware that he has committed the sin of taking refuge from life; he knows that the extraordinary respect which he pays to his conscience is at bottom a doping of that organ; he perceives that the smooth path is in fact the rough path, and that the rough path, which he dared not face, might have been, with all its asperities, the smooth one. His existence is a vast secret and poisonous regret; and there is nothing whatever to be done; there is no antidote for the poison; the dope is a drug—and insufficient at that.

### V

Women, even in these latter days when reason is supposed to have got human nature by the neck, have far greater opportunities and temptations than men

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to run away from life. Indeed, many of them are taught and encouraged to do so. The practice of the three ancient cardinal female virtues—shutting your eyes, stopping your ears, and burying your head in the sand—is very carefully inculcated; and then, of course, people turn round on young women and upbraid them because they are afraid of existence! And, though things are changing, they have not yet definitely changed. I would not blame a whole sex—no matter which—for anything whatever. But to state a fact is not to blame. The fact is that women, when they get a chance, do show a tendency to shirk life. Large numbers of them come to grips with life simply because they are compelled to do so. A woman whose material existence is well assured will not as a rule go out into the world. Further, she will not marry as willingly as the woman who needs a home and cannot see the prospect of it except through marriage. By which I mean to imply that with women the achievement of marriage is due less to the instinct to mate than to an economic instinct. Men are wicked animals and know not righteousness, but it may be said of them generally that with them the achievement of marriage *is* due to the instinct to mate.

Examining the cases of certain women who put off marrying, I have been forced to the conclusion that their only reason for hesitating to marry is that men are not perfect, and that to marry an imperfect man involves risk. It does, but the reason is not valid. Risk is the very essence of life, and the total absence of danger is equal to death. I do not say that to follow an unsatisfactory vocation and to fail in it is better than to follow no vocation. But I am inclined to say that

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any marriage is better than no marriage—for both sexes. And I think that the most tragic spectacle on earth is an old woman metaphorically wrapped in cotton-wool who at some period of her career has refused life because of the peril of inconvenience and unhappiness.

Both men and women can run away from life in ways far more subtle and less drastic than those which I have named. For the sake of clearness I have confined myself to rather crude and obvious examples of flight. There are probably few of us who are not conscious of having declined at least some minor challenge of existence. And there are still fewer of us who can charge ourselves with having been consistently too bold in our desire to get the full savour of existence.

## VI

Each individual must define happiness for himself or herself. For my part, I rule out practically all the dictionary definitions. In most dictionaries you will find that the principal meaning attached to the word is 'good fortune' or 'prosperity.' Which is notoriously absurd. Then come such definitions as "a state of well-being characterized by relative permanence, by dominantly agreeable emotion . . . and by a natural desire for its continuation." This last is from Webster, and it is very clever. Yet I will have none of it, unless I am allowed to define the word 'well-being' in my own way.

For me, an individual cannot be in a state of well-being if any of his faculties are permanently idle through any fault of his own. The full utilization of

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all the faculties seems to me to be the foundation of well-being. But I doubt if a full utilization of all the faculties necessarily involves the idea of good fortune, or prosperity, or tranquillity, or contentedness with one's lot, or even a "dominantly agreeable emotion"; very often it rather involves the contrary.

In my view happiness includes chiefly the idea of "satisfaction after full honest effort." Everybody is guilty of mistakes and of serious mistakes, and the contemplation of these mistakes must darken, be it ever so little, the last years of existence. But it need not be fatal to a general satisfaction. Men and women may in the end be forced to admit, "I made a fool of myself," and still be fairly happy. But no one can possibly be satisfied, and therefore no one can in my sense be happy, who feels that in some paramount affair he has failed to take up the challenge of life. For a voice within him, which none else can hear, but which he cannot choke, will constantly be murmuring:

"You lacked courage. You hadn't the pluck. You ran away."

And it is happier to be unhappy in the ordinary sense all one's life than to have to listen at the end to that dreadful interior verdict.

*From "Self and Self-management"*

## SETTLING DOWN IN LIFE

THE other day a well-known English novelist asked me how old I thought she was, *really*. "Well," I said to myself, "since she has asked for it, she shall have it; I will be as true to life as her novels." So I replied audaciously: "Thirty-eight." I fancied I was erring, if at all, on the side of "really," and I trembled. She laughed triumphantly. "I am forty-three," she said. The incident might have passed off entirely to my satisfaction had she not proceeded: "And now tell me how old *you* are." That was like a woman. Women imagine that men have no reticences, no pretty little vanities. What an error! Of course I could not be beaten in candour by a woman. I had to offer myself a burnt sacrifice to her curiosity, and I did it, bravely but not unflinchingly. And then afterwards the fact of my age remained with me, worried me, obsessed me. I saw more clearly than ever before that age was telling on me. I could not be blind to the deliberation of my movements in climbing stairs and in dressing. Once upon a time the majority of persons I met in the street seemed much older than myself. It is different now. The change has come unperceived. There is a generation younger than mine that smokes cigars and falls in love. Astounding! Once I could play left-wing forward for an hour and a half without dropping down dead. Once I could swim a hundred and fifty feet submerged at the bottom of a swimming-bath. Incredible! Simply incredible! . . . Can it be that I have already lived?

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And lo! I, at the age of nearly forty, am putting to myself the old questions concerning the intrinsic value of life, the fundamentally important questions: What have I got out of it? What am I likely to get out of it? In a word, what's it worth? If a man can ask himself a question more momentous, radical, and critical than these questions, I would like to know what it is. Innumerable philosophers have tried to answer these questions in a general way for the average individual, and possibly they have succeeded pretty well. Possibly I might derive benefit from a perusal of their answers. But do you suppose I am going to read them? Not I! Do you suppose that I can recall the wisdom that I happen already to have read? Not I! My mind is a perfect blank at this moment in regard to the wisdom of others on the essential question. Strange, is it not? But quite a common experience, I believe. Besides, I don't actually care twopence what any other philosopher has replied to my question. In this, each man must be his own philosopher. There is an instinct in the profound egoism of human nature which prevents us from accepting such ready-made answers. What is it to us what Plato thought? Nothing. And thus the question remains ever new, and ever unanswered, and ever of dramatic interest. The singular, the highly singular thing is—and here I arrive at my point—that so few people put the question to themselves in time, that so many put it too late, or even die without putting it.

I am firmly convinced that an immense proportion of my instructed fellow-creatures do not merely omit to strike the balance-sheet of their lives, they omit even the preliminary operation of taking stock. They

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go on, and on, and on, buying and selling they know not what, at unascertained prices, dropping money into the till and taking it out. They don't know what goods are in the shop, nor what amount is in the till, but they have a clear impression that the living-room behind the shop is by no means as luxurious and as well ventilated as they would like it to be. And the years pass, and that beautiful furniture and that system of ventilation are not achieved. And then one day they die, and friends come to the funeral and remark: "Dear me! How stuffy this room is, and the shop's practically full of trash!" Or, some little time before they are dead, they stay later than usual in the shop one evening, and make up their minds to take stock and count the till, and the disillusion lays them low, and they struggle into the living-room and murmur: "I shall never have that beautiful furniture, and I shall never have that system of ventilation. If I had known earlier, I would have at least got a few inexpensive cushions to go on with, and I would have put my fist through a pane in the window. But it's too late now. I'm used to Windsor chairs, and I should feel the draught horribly."

If I were a preacher, and if I hadn't got more than enough to do in minding my own affairs, and if I could look anyone in the face and deny that I too had pursued for nearly forty years the great British policy of muddling through and hoping for the best—in short, if things were not what they are, I would hire the Alhambra Theatre or Exeter Hall of a Sunday night—preferably the Alhambra, because more people would come to my entertainment—and I would invite all men and women over twenty-six. I would

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supply the seething crowd with what they desired in the way of bodily refreshment (except spirits—I would draw the line at poisons), and having got them and myself into a nice amiable expansive frame of mind, I would thus address them—of course in ringing eloquence that John Bright might have envied:

“Men and women [I would say], companions in the universal pastime of hiding one’s head in the sand, I am about to impart to you the very essence of human wisdom. It is not abstract. It is a principle of daily application, affecting the daily round in its entirety, from the straphanging on the District Railway in the morning to the straphanging on the District Railway the next morning. Beware of hope, and beware of ambition! Each is excellently tonic, like German competition, in moderation. But all of you are suffering from self-indulgence in the first, and very many of you are ruining your constitutions with the second. Be it known unto you, my dear men and women, that existence rightly considered is a fair compromise between two instincts—the instinct of hoping one day to live, and the instinct to live here and now. In most of you the first instinct has simply got the other by the throat and is throttling it. Prepare to live by all means, but for heaven’s sake do not forget to live. You will never have a better chance than you have at present. You may think you will have, but you are mistaken. Pardon this bluntness. Surely you are not so naïve as to imagine that the road on the other side of that hill there is more beautiful than the piece you are now traversing! Hopes are never realized; for in the act of realization they become something else. Ambitions may be attained, but ambitions attained are rather like

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burnt coal—ninety per cent. of the heat generated has gone up the chimney instead of into the room. Nevertheless, indulge in hopes and ambitions, which, though deceiving, are agreeable deceptions; let them cheat you a little, a lot. But do not let them cheat you too much. This that you are living now is life itself—it is much more life itself than that which you will be living twenty years hence. Grasp that truth. Dwell on it. Absorb it. Let it influence your conduct, to the end that neither the present nor the future be neglected. You search for happiness? Happiness is chiefly a matter of temperament. It is exceedingly improbable that you will by struggling gain more happiness than you already possess. In fine, settle down at once into *life*.” (Loud cheers.)

The cheers would of course be for the refreshments.

There is no doubt that the mass of the audience would consider that I had missed my vocation, and ought to have been a caterer instead of a preacher. But, once started, I would not be discouraged. I would keep on, Sunday night after Sunday night. Our leading advertisers have richly proved that the public will believe anything if they are told of it often enough. I would practise iteration, always with refreshments. In the result, it would dawn upon the corporate mind that there was some glimmering of sense in my doctrine, and people would at last begin to perceive the folly of neglecting to savour the present, the folly of assuming that the future can be essentially different from the present, the fatuity of dying before they have begun to live.

*From “The Reasonable Life”*

## ILL-HEALTH

PEOPLE admit themselves 'unwell' oftener than they used to do. That is because they know a little more about the greatest of all physical marvels and mysteries, the human body. In former days an indisposition was looked upon as the act of God, and regarded fatalistically. Now it is known to be the act of man, and therefore, perhaps, curable if officially proclaimed and treated. The champions of the past in this matter say that we are a generation of molly-coddles; but the champions of the past are usually persons of immensely strong physique, and they take credit to themselves for what has been merely their good luck. Worse, they will attribute their longevity and their good health to some perfectly footing habit.

"I am eighty-five, and have all my own teeth," says a man. "Why? Because I shave after washing. The new generation washes after shaving. If it would only shave after washing——" etc.

Still, we live appreciably longer than our ancestors. Some will assert that since life is a nuisance, long life is a still greater nuisance. But if you ask these whether they would be willing to go back to the old state, the answer will either be in the negative or it will be a lie.

In some ways we have retained the foolishness of the past. To-day, just as in the past, there are certain diseases, especially those affecting physical attractiveness, as to which women will unfailingly become hysterical. And men are as apt as ever to become hysterical if their digestive organs go wrong. Also,

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a person who knows he suffers from a chronic malady will attribute all his ills to that malady, forgetting that he is as liable as his fellows to some scores of other maladies.

On the other hand a man will still as of old deny to himself the existence of an obvious chronic malady, and carry on his existence exactly as if his proper place was not in bed—and then die suddenly, and have the effrontery to be surprised thereat.

Again, we still dose ourselves as if we had expert knowledge, and swear at doctors. It is true that doctors don't know much about disease, but they know much more than laymen. Our forefathers indulged in what were called herbs and simples. We indulge in pills (of various shapes), and on a far vaster scale. Herbs and simples possibly did some good in a few cases, when used with knowledge and discretion. The same, and not more, may be said of self-administered pills. You can get pills scientifically and admirably prepared to cure any mortal thing short of a broken leg. Nothing can be said against good pills. But much can be said against the ignorant and immoderate users of good pills—that is, the great majority of us. Pills form part of the secret life of nearly all of us. We have the vice of drug-taking, and about ninety-five per cent. of the pills swallowed in a little water serve no good purpose. That they do small permanent harm is due to the tremendous powers of the human organism.

The trade in drugs must be terrific; and though I object to our liberty being stolen from us bit by bit by a Government that is worse than forty thousand grandmothers, I admit that when the British Government prohibited the unfettered sale of certain very

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dangerous drugs it won my applause. Only yesterday we could walk into a shop and buy as easily as biscuits enough sulphonal, veronal, and trional to ruin the lives of a whole family. This was the liberty to perish, and Governments are not entirely vile.

We have not yet arrived at a comprehension of the deep truth that a man who is his own doctor has a fool for his patient. Even doctors rarely treat themselves!

Many, if not most, persons regard a doctor as a magician, and in this respect we have not improved much on the remote past, when magicians were the only doctors. A patient will believe simply anything from a doctor who attended the patient's father and mother. The 'family doctor' is infallible, and no amount of funerals will affect his infallibility. We are like savages in another point, that sometimes we kill our magicians, that is to say, we change our doctors, often for no reason except that we want fresh magic.

In this yearning for fresh magic we are apt to go to 'the nearest man,' not because the slightest delay might be fatal, but because it is simpler to go to the nearest man. Yes, and it happens sometimes that we choose a doctor because he plays good golf or good tennis, or because his motor-car looks smart, or because his political opinions coincide with our own, or because he takes a dignified part in the public life of the town, or because he has a nice smile.

Most ailments get cured or cure themselves in the end, yet if the new doctor has a nice smile or plays good golf and the first case is a success, then he is unalterably established in our esteem as a magician for years to come.

The fact is that doctors simply are not chosen for

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their professional skill, and professional skill is only one of the ingredients of a successful medical practice, and not the most important one. Not seldom, indeed, a very successful practice is achieved without any professional skill worth mentioning. At best doctors are chosen for their character—and how many of us are sure judges of character? Human nature is such that the best of us may be deceived by a doctor who is honestly deceiving himself. I knew a doctor who built up a fine practice and a considerable fortune on one method. He was a mediocre physician, but he had the invaluable gift of persuading himself that if he had been called in twenty-four hours later the case might have proved fatal.

“My dear sir, or madam,” he would say to a new patient, after the first few days, speaking in a quiet, restrained, and authoritative voice, “I didn’t care to speak earlier, but I may tell you now that you called me in only just in time. Another day and I shouldn’t like to think what might have happened. However, I was fortunate in my treatment, and the danger is over for the present.”

Patients were enormously impressed. At the end of his splendid career that doctor had the conviction that he had positively saved the lives of half the community which he adorned. And he was not all alone in the conviction.

The patient will naturally ask: “But how can I judge the professional skill of a doctor?” The answer is that he cannot. To a certain extent the laity is at the mercy of the medicals. But the patient can, at any rate, judge his doctor on the manner in which he approaches the case. The good doctor approaches the

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case in a spirit of scientific inquiry. The good doctor will not limit his attention to the particular ailment or symptoms which are the occasion of his visit. He will know that an ailment seldom stands by itself. He will inform himself about the patient's age, vocation, daily habits, and medical history, and he will note these things down. Then he will get at the history of the particular ailment, the present symptoms, and, especially, just what made the patient send for him at just that moment. Then he will make a thorough examination of the patient, and, if the case is serious, he will make several examinations. He will consider the patient's physique as a whole and his existence as a whole; and then he will prescribe. He will assuredly not give the impression to the patient that the malady is accidental, or that the treatment consists wholly or even chiefly in bottles of medicine, powders, pills.

If a doctor conducts his professional work in this spirit, with this thoroughness, and with this sense of proportion and of perspective, the chances are that he really knows his job and has the character and ability to execute his job successfully. If he doesn't, then the chances are that, despite good golf, dignified deportment, and a nice smile, he is not a competent doctor according to modern standards. And all these things will count for little unless a diligent attentiveness is maintained. You may say that the most foolish patient would take stock of a doctor's attentiveness or lack of it, and act accordingly. Not always so. I once knew a doctor who said to a patient: "It is of the greatest importance that you should eat nothing—you understand, nothing—until I have seen you again. Please remember, *nothing!*" He called again in three weeks.

## ILL-HEALTH

And this was not uncharacteristic of his ways. Yet he had a big country practice and was beloved as a magician.

Modern clinical standards show some improvement on those of even eight years ago, and for two reasons, both due to the War. In the first place, during the War perhaps five million men either went through hospitals or came up frequently for hospital parade. And despite their frequent dissatisfaction they thereby learnt a very great deal about medicine and medical and surgical treatment. They now know something about what a thorough diagnosis is, and they have spread their knowledge among families and friends. If they fall ill, or if their relatives fall ill, they expect a scientific attitude and some attention to detail from their doctors. They are aware of some of the latest devices, and they are discontented if the said devices are not applied to themselves.

The day is gone when the doctor, on being summoned, could come and chat miscellaneous and pleasantly of nothing in particular for a quarter of an hour, and then glance casually at the tongue for two seconds, take the pulse in thirty seconds, and, murmuring vague reassurances and a promise to dispatch coloured medicine, depart full of complacency and honour.

And in the second place the doctors have learnt a lot. Doctors, including panel doctors, were called up and put under the very best men in all sorts of hospitals throughout the country. Doctors were also attached to medical boards and pension boards. They necessarily acquired precious information concerning the absolute necessity of careful diagnosis according to a

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routine which omitted nothing, and they returned to their ordinary practices loaded with the said information and habituated to methods of diagnosis and treatment which at any rate are not unscientific. And so the doctor is now more or less able to supply what the enlightened patient demands. Before the War, everybody who was accustomed to both English and French doctors must have been struck by the more searching and thorough methods of the latter. The difference between the two was indeed sometimes quite startling. I do not desire to praise French doctors at the expense of the English, and I am entirely convinced that English hospitals, both military and civil, were and are superior to French; but I know from an experience extending over years that the French doctor had at least a scientific attitude towards disease, especially in diagnosis, which was exceedingly rare in the English.

*From "Things that have Interested Me,"  
Second Series*

## A DAY'S SAIL

ALTHOUGH there is a lively pleasure in discovering even the dullest and smallest towns and villages, the finest experience offered by the Baltic is the savour of the Baltic itself in a long day's sail. I mean a day of fourteen hours at least, from six in the morning till eight at night, through varied seascapes and landscapes and varied weather. As soon as the yacht leaves harbour in the bracing chill of sunrise she becomes a distinct entity, independent, self-reliant. The half-dozen men on her, cut off from the world, are closely knitted into a new companionship, the sense of which is expressed not in words, but by the subtleties of tone and mien; and if only one among them falls short of absolute loyalty and goodwill towards the rest, the republic is a failure, and the air of ocean poisoned. The dictum of an older and far more practised yachtsman than myself used always to be, "I'll have no man aboard my ship who can't smile all the time." It is a good saying. And it could be applied to my yacht in the Baltic. We had days at sea in the Baltic which were ideal and thrilling from one end to the other.

To make a final study of the chart in the cabin while waiting for breakfast is a thrilling act. You choose a name on the chart, and decide: "We will go to that name." It is a name. It is not yet a town or village. It is just what you imagine it to be until you first sight it, when it instantly falsifies every fancy. The course is settled. The ship is on that course. The landmarks will suffice for an hour or two, but the sea-marks must

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be deciphered on the chart, which is an English chart, and hence inferior in fullness and clearness to either French or Dutch charts. Strange, this, for a nation pre-eminently maritime! To compensate, the English *Sailing Directions*—for example, the *Pilot's Guide to the Baltic*—are so admirably written that it is a pleasure to read them. Lucid, succinct, elegant, they might serve as models to a novelist. And they are anonymous.

To pick up the first buoy is thrilling. We are all equally ignorant of these waters; the skipper himself has not previously sailed them, and we are all, save the cook, engulfed below amid swaying saucepans, on the look-out for that buoy. It ought to be visible at a certain hour, but it is not. The skipper points with his hand and says the buoy must be about there, but it is not. He looks through my glasses, and I look through his; no result. Then the deck-hand, without glasses, cries grinning that he has located her. After a quarter of an hour I can see the thing myself. That a buoy? It is naught but a pole with a slightly swollen head. Absurd to call it a buoy! Nevertheless, we are relieved, and in a superior manner we reconcile ourselves to the Baltic idiosyncrasy of employing broom-handles for buoys. The reason for this dangerous idiosyncrasy neither the skipper nor anybody else could divine. Presently we have the broom close abeam, a bobbing stick alone in the immense wilderness of water. There it is on the chart, and there it is in the water, a romantic miracle. We assuage its solitude for a few minutes, and then abandon it to loneliness.

We resume the study of the chart; for although we are quite sure of our course, the skipper can never be

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sure enough. My attention is drawn to a footnote that explains the ice-signals of the Baltic. And the skipper sets to telling tales of terror about the ice, in the Zuyder Zee and other seas. He tells how the ice forms under the ship surreptitiously, coming up from the bottom like treacle. You say, "It's freezing to-night," and the next morning the ship can't move; and you may die of starvation, for though the ice will hold the ship, it won't hold you. The skipper knew men who could remember ice in the Zuyder Zee in June. He himself had once oscillated for a whole week between two ports on the Zuyder Zee, visible to each other, pushed hither and thither by the ice, and unable to get anywhere at all. But ice was less terrible than it used to be, owing to the increased strength and efficiency of ice-breakers. And climate was less rigorous. Thus the skipper would reassure us for a moment, only to intimidate us afresh. For it seems that the ice has a way of climbing; it will climb up over everything, and enclose a ship. Indeed, he was most impressive on the subject of ice. He said that the twin horrors of the sea were ice and fog. But of fog he told no tales, being occupied with the forward valve of the engine. We perceived that yachtsmen who go out when it happens to suit them, between May and September only, can never achieve intimacy with the entire individuality of the sea.

The weather has now cleared for a while. The sun is hot, the saloon skylight warm to the touch. You throw off a jersey. The tumbling water is a scale of deep blues, splendid against the brass of the bollard and the reddishness of the spars. The engine is running without a 'knock'; the sails are nicely filled; the

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patent log is twirling aft. A small rainbow shines steadily in the foam thrown up from the bows, and a great rainbow stretches across all heaven, with its own ghost parallel to it. Among the large, soft clouds, rags of dark cloud are uneasily floating. On the flat shores of near islands the same cereals ripen as ripen at home. And this is thrilling. Distant islands are miraged. Even a distant battleship seems to be lifted clean out of the water by the so-called mirage.

And then a trading-schooner, small, but much larger than us, relentlessly overhauls us. She laughs at the efforts of our engine to aid our sails, and forges ahead, all slanting, with her dinghy slung up tight aft, over her rudder. And then it is the still small voice of the stomach that speaks. Hunger and repletion follow each other very swiftly on such days. The after-breakfast cigar is scarcely finished before a genuine curiosity as to the menu of lunch comes to birth within. We glance into the saloon. Yes, the white cloth is laid, but we cannot eat cloth. The cook and the chronometer are conspiring together against us.

In the afternoon the weather is thick and squally. And we are creeping between sad and forlorn veiled islands that seem to exude all the melancholy of the seas. There is plenty of water, but only in a deceiving horizontal sense. The channel is almost as narrow and as tortuous as a Devonshire lane. English charts are criminally preposterous, and so are Danish brooms. Hardly can one distinguish between a starboard and a port broom. Is the life of a yacht to depend on such negligent devices? The skipper is worried. And the spectacle of a ship aground in mid-sea does not tranquilize. Sometimes the hail wipes out for a few seconds

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the whole prospect. The eyes of everybody are strained with looking for distant brooms.

Then we are free of the archipelago, and also the sky clears. The sun, turning orange, is behind us, and the wind in our teeth. Ahead is a schooner, beating. And she is the schooner of the morning. Our engine now has the better of her. As we overtake her, she runs away on one tack, and comes back on the next. She bears down on our stern, huge, black, glittering. A man and a boy are all her crew. This man and this boy are entitled to be called mariners, as distinguished from yachtsmen. We can see their faces plainly as they gaze down at us from their high deck. And you may see just the same faces on the liners that carry emigrants from Denmark to the West, and the same limbs sprawling on the decks of the Esbjerg steamers, as the same hands scrawl Danish characters on picture postal cards to the inhabitants of these very islands.

The sea is now purple, and the schooner a little black blot on the red panorama of the sunset; and ahead, amid faint yellow and green fields, is a white speck, together with sundry red specks and blue specks. The name on the chart! And then the haven is descried, and a ring of masts with fluttering rags. And then the lighthouse and the roofs detach themselves, and the actual mouth of the haven appears. Twilight falls; the engine is moderated; the deck-hand stands by with a pole. Very slowly we slide in, and the multitudinous bright tints of the fishing-smacks are startlingly gay even in the dusk. The skipper glances rapidly about him, and yells out in Dutch to a fisherman, who replies in Danish. The skipper shakes his head, at a loss, and gives an order to the deck-hand.

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The deck-hand claws with a pole at a yellow smack. We have ceased to be independent. The name on the chart is a name no longer. It is a living burg, a poor little place, good enough to sleep in, and no more. But another stage on the journey to that magic capital Copenhagen.

*From "From the Log of the Velsa"*

## W. W. JACOBS AND ARISTOPHANES

I HAVE been reading a new novel by Mr W. W. Jacobs—*Salthaven* (Methuen, 6s.). It is a long time since I read a book of his. Ministries have fallen since then, and probably Mr Jacobs' prices have risen—indeed, much has happened—but the talent of the author of *Many Cargoes* remains steadfast where it did. *Salthaven* is a funny book. Captain Trimblett, to excuse the lateness of a friend for tea, says to the landlady: "He saw a man nearly run over!" and the landlady replies: "Yes, but how long would that take him?" If you ask me whether I consider this humorous, I reply that I do. I also consider humorous this conversational description of an exemplary boy who took to *Sandford and Merton* "as a duck takes to water": "By modelling his life on its teaching" (says young Vyner) "he won a silver medal for never missing an attendance at school. Even the measles failed to stop him. Day by day, a little more flushed than usual, perhaps, he sat in his place until the whole school was down with it, and had to be closed in consequence. Then and not till then did he feel that he had saved the situation." I care nothing for the outrageous improbability of any youthful son of a ship-owner being able to talk in the brilliant fashion in which Mr Jacobs makes Vyner talk. Success excuses it. *Salthaven* is bathed in humour.

At the same time I am dissatisfied with *Salthaven*. And I do not find it easy to explain why. I suppose the real reason is that it discloses no signs of any

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development whatever on the part of the author. Worse, it discloses no signs of intellectual curiosity on the part of the author. Mr Jacobs seems to live apart from the movement of his age. Nothing, except the particular type of humanity and environment in which he specializes, seems to interest him. There is no hint of a general idea in his work. By some of his fellow-artists he is immensely admired. I have heard him called, seriously, the greatest humorist since Aristophanes. I admire him myself, and I will not swear that he is not the greatest humorist since Aristophanes. But I will swear that no genuine humorist ever resembled Aristophanes less than Mr Jacobs does. Aristophanes was passionately interested in everything. He would leave nothing alone. Whereas Mr Jacobs will leave nearly everything alone. Kipling's general ideas are excessively crude, but one does feel in reading him that his curiosity is boundless, even though his taste in literature must infallibly be bad. "Q" is not to be compared in creative power with either of these two men, but one does feel in reading him that he is interested in other manifestations of his own art, that he cares for literature. Impossible to gather from Mr Jacobs' work that he cares for anything serious at all; impossible to differentiate his intellectual outlook from that of an average reader of the *Strand Magazine*! I do not bring this as a reproach against Mr Jacobs, whose personality it would be difficult not to esteem and to like. He cannot alter himself. I merely record the phenomenon as worthy of notice.

Mr Jacobs is not alone. Among our very successful novelists there are many like him in what I will roundly term intellectual sluggishness, though there is, perhaps,

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none with quite his talent. Have these men entered into a secret compact not to touch a problem even with a pair of tongs? Or are they afraid of being confused with Hall Caine, Mrs Humphry Ward, and Miss Marie Corelli, who anyhow have the merit of being interested in the wide aspects of their age? I do not know. But I think we might expect a little more general activity from some of our authors who lie tranquil, steeped in success as lizards in sunshine. I speak delicately, for I am on delicate ground. I do, however, speak as a creative artist, and not as a critic. Occasionally my correspondents upbraid me for not writing like a critic. I have never pretended to look at things from any other standpoint than that of a creative artist.

*From "Books and Persons"*

## SERIOUS READING

NOVELS are excluded from 'serious reading,' so that the man who, bent on self-improvement, has been deciding to devote ninety minutes three times a week to a complete study of the works of Charles Dickens will be well advised to alter his plans. The reason is not that novels are not serious—some of the greatest literature of the world is in the form of prose fiction—the reason is that bad novels ought not to be read, and that good novels never demand any appreciable mental application on the part of the reader. It is only the bad parts of Meredith's novels that are difficult. A good novel rushes you forward like a skiff down a stream, and you arrive at the end, perhaps breathless, but unexhausted. The best novels involve the least strain. Now in the cultivation of the mind one of the most important factors is precisely the feeling of strain, of difficulty, of a task which one part of you is anxious to achieve and another part of you is anxious to shirk; and that feeling cannot be got in facing a novel. You do not set your teeth in order to read *Anna Karenina*. Therefore, though you should read novels, you should not read them in those ninety minutes.

Imaginative poetry produces a far greater mental strain than novels. It produces probably the severest strain of any form of literature. It is the highest form of literature. It yields the highest form of pleasure, and teaches the highest form of wisdom. In a word, there is nothing to compare with it. I say this with

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sad consciousness of the fact that the majority of people do not read poetry.

I am persuaded that many excellent persons, if they were confronted with the alternative of reading *Paradise Lost* and going round Trafalgar Square at noonday on their knees in sackcloth, would choose the ordeal of public ridicule. Still, I will never cease advising my friends and enemies to read poetry before anything.

If poetry is what is called 'a sealed book' to you, begin by reading Hazlitt's famous essay on the nature of "poetry in general." It is the best thing of its kind in English, and no one who has read it can possibly be under the misapprehension that poetry is a mediæval torture, or a mad elephant, or a gun that will go off by itself and kill at forty paces. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the mental state of the man who, after reading Hazlitt's essay, is not urgently desirous of reading some poetry before his next meal. If the essay so inspires you I would suggest that you make a commencement with purely narrative poetry.

There is an infinitely finer English novel, written by a woman, than anything by George Eliot or the Brontës, or even Jane Austen, which perhaps you have not read. Its title is *Aurora Leigh*, and its author E. B. Browning. It happens to be written in verse, and to contain a considerable amount of genuinely fine poetry. Decide to read that book through, even if you die for it. Forget that it is fine poetry. Read it simply for the story and the social ideas. And when you have done, ask yourself honestly whether you still dislike poetry. I have known more than one person to whom *Aurora Leigh* has been the means of proving

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that in assuming they hated poetry they were entirely mistaken.

Of course, if, after Hazlitt, and such an experiment made in the light of Hazlitt, you are finally assured that there is something in you which is antagonistic to poetry, you must be content with history or philosophy. I shall regret it, yet not inconsolably. *The Decline and Fall* is not to be named in the same day with *Paradise Lost*, but it is a vastly pretty thing; and Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* simply laughs at the claims of poetry, and refuses to be accepted as aught but the most majestic product of any human mind. I do not suggest that either of these works is suitable for a tyro in mental strains. But I see no reason why any man of average intelligence should not, after a year of continuous reading, be fit to assault the supreme masterpieces of history or philosophy. The great convenience of masterpieces is that they are so astonishingly lucid.

I suggest nothing as a start. The attempt would be futile in the space at my command. But I have two general suggestions of a certain importance. The first is to define the scope and direction of your efforts. Choose a limited period, or a limited subject, or a single author. Say to yourself: "I will know something about the French Revolution, or the rise of railways, or the works of John Keats." And during a given period, to be settled beforehand, confine yourself to your choice. There is much pleasure to be derived from being a specialist.

The second suggestion is to think as well as to read. I know people who read and read, and for all the good it does them they might just as well cut bread-and-

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butter. They take to reading as better men take to drink. They fly through the shires of literature on a motor-car, their sole object being motion. They will tell you how many books they have read in a year.

Unless you give at least forty-five minutes to careful, fatiguing reflection (it is an awful bore at first) upon what you are reading, your ninety minutes of a night are chiefly wasted. This means that your pace will be slow.

Never mind.

Forget the goal; think only of the surrounding country; and after a period, perhaps when you least expect it, you will suddenly find yourself in a lovely town on a hill.

*From "How to Live on 24 Hours a Day"*

## WRITING NOVELS

A SENSE of beauty and a passionate intensity of vision being taken for granted, the one other important attribute in the equipment of the novelist—the attribute which indeed by itself practically suffices, and whose absence renders futile all the rest—is fineness of mind. A great novelist must have great qualities of mind. His mind must be sympathetic, quickly responsive, courageous, honest, humorous, tender, just, merciful. He must be able to conceive the ideal without losing sight of the fact that it is a human world we live in. Above all, his mind must be permeated and controlled by common sense. His mind, in a word, must have the quality of being noble. Unless his mind is all this, he will never, at the ultimate bar, be reckoned supreme. That which counts, on every page, and all the time, is the very texture of his mind—the glass through which he sees things. Every other attribute is secondary, and is dispensable. Fielding lives unequalled among English novelists because the broad nobility of his mind is unequalled. He is read with unreserved enthusiasm because the reader feels himself at each paragraph to be in close contact with a glorious personality. And no advance in technique among later novelists can possibly imperil his position. He will take second place when a more noble mind, a more superb common sense, happens to wield the narrative pen, and not before. What undermines the renown of Dickens is the growing conviction that the texture of his mind was common, that he fell short in courageous

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facing of the truth, and in certain delicacies of perception. As much may be said of Thackeray, whose mind was somewhat incomplete for so grandiose a figure, and not free from defects which are inimical to immortality.

It is a hard saying for me, and full of danger in any country whose artists have shown contempt for form, yet I am obliged to say that, as the years pass, I attach less and less importance to good technique in fiction. I love it, and I have fought for a better recognition of its importance in England, but I now have to admit that the modern history of fiction will not support me. With the single exception of Turgenev, the great novelists of the world, according to my own standards, have either ignored technique or have failed to understand it. What an error to suppose that the finest foreign novels show a better sense of form than the finest English novels! Balzac was a prodigious blunderer. He could not even manage a sentence, not to speak of the general form of a book. And as for a greater than Balzac—Stendhal—his scorn of technique was notorious. Stendhal was capable of writing, in a masterpiece: “By the way, I ought to have told you earlier that the Duchess——!” And as for a greater than either Balzac or Stendhal—Dostoievsky—what a hasty, amorphous lump of gold is the sublime, the unapproachable *Brothers Karamazov*! Any tutor in a college for teaching the whole art of fiction by post in twelve lessons could show where Dostoievsky was clumsy and careless. What would have been Flaubert’s detailed criticism of that book? And what would it matter? And, to take a minor example, witness the comically amateurish technique of the late “Mark

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Rutherford"—nevertheless a novelist whom one can deeply admire.

And when we come to consider the great technicians, Guy de Maupassant and Flaubert, can we say that their technique will save them, or atone in the slightest degree for the defects of their minds? Exceptional artists both, they are both now inevitably falling in esteem to the level of the second-rate. Human nature being what it is, and de Maupassant being tinged with eroticism, his work is sure to be read with interest by mankind; but he is already classed. Nobody, now, despite all his brilliant excellences, would dream of putting de Maupassant with the first magnitudes. And the declension of Flaubert is one of the outstanding phenomena of modern French criticism. It is being discovered that Flaubert's mind was not quite noble enough—that, indeed, it was a cruel mind, and a little anæmic. *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was the crowning proof that Flaubert had lost sight of the humanness of the world, and suffered from the delusion that he had been born on the wrong planet. The glitter of his technique is dulled now, and fools even count it against him. In regard to one section of human activity only did his mind seem noble—namely, literary technique. His correspondence, written, of course, currently, was largely occupied with the question of literary technique, and his correspondence stands forth to-day as his best work—a marvellous fount of inspiration to his fellow-artists. So I return to the point that the novelist's one important attribute (beyond the two postulated) is fundamental quality of mind. It and nothing else makes both the friends and the enemies which he has; while the influence of technique is

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slight and transitory. And I repeat that it is a hard saying.

I begin to think that great writers of fiction are by the mysterious nature of their art ordained to be 'amateurs.' There may be something of the amateur in all great artists. I do not know why it should be so, unless because, in the exuberance of their sense of power, they are impatient of the exactitudes of systematic study and the mere bother of repeated attempts to arrive at a minor perfection. Assuredly no great artist was ever a profound scholar. The great artist has other ends to achieve. And every artist, major and minor, is aware in his conscience that art is full of artifice, and that the desire to proceed rapidly with the affair of creation, and an excusable dislike of re-creating anything twice, thrice, or ten times over—unnatural task!—are responsible for much of that artifice. We can all point in excuse to Shakspeare, who was a very rough-and-ready person, and whose methods would shock Flaubert. Indeed, the amateurishness of Shakspeare has been mightily exposed of late years. But nobody seems to care. If Flaubert had been a greater artist he might have been more of an amateur.

Of this poor neglected matter of technique the more important branch is design—or construction. It is the branch of the art—of all arts—which comes next after 'inspiration'—a capacious word meant to include everything that the artist must be born with and cannot acquire. The less important branch of technique—far less important—may be described as an ornamentation.

There are very few rules of design in the novel; but the few are capital. Nevertheless, great novelists

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have often flouted or ignored them—to the detriment of their work. In my opinion the first rule is that the interest must be centralized; it must not be diffused equally over various parts of the canvas. To compare one art with another may be perilous, but really the convenience of describing a novel as a canvas is extreme. In a well-designed picture the eye is drawn chiefly to one particular spot. If the eye is drawn with equal force to several different spots, then we reproach the painter for having ‘scattered’ the interest of the picture. Similarly with the novel. A novel must have one, two, or three figures that easily overtop the rest. These figures must be in the foreground, and the rest in the middle-distance or in the background.

Moreover, these figures—whether they are saints or sinners—must somehow be presented more sympathetically than the others. If this cannot be done, then the inspiration is at fault. The single motive that should govern the choice of a principal figure is the motive of love for that figure. What else could the motive be? The race of heroes is essential to art. But what makes a hero is less the deeds of the figure chosen than the understanding sympathy of the artist with the figure. To say that the hero has disappeared from modern fiction is absurd. All that has happened is that the characteristics of the hero have changed, naturally, with the times. When Thackeray wrote “a novel without a hero,” he wrote a novel with a first-class hero, and nobody knew this better than Thackeray. What he meant was that he was sick of the conventional bundle of characteristics styled a hero in his day, and that he had changed the type. Since then we have grown sick of Dobbins, and the type has been changed

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again more than once. The fateful hour will arrive when we shall be sick of Ponderevos.

The temptation of the great novelist, overflowing with creative force, is to scatter the interest. In both his major works Tolstoi found the temptation too strong for him. *Anna Karenina* is not one novel, but two, and suffers accordingly. As for *War and Peace*, the reader wanders about in it as in a forest, for days, lost, deprived of a sense of direction, and with no vestige of a signpost; at intervals encountering mysterious faces whose identity he in vain tries to recall. On a much smaller scale Meredith committed the same error. Who could assert positively which of the sisters Fleming is the heroine of *Rhoda Fleming*? For nearly two hundred pages at a stretch Rhoda scarcely appears. And more than once the author seems quite to forget that the little knave Algernon is not, after all, the hero of the story.

The second rule of design—perhaps in the main merely a different view of the first—is that the interest must be maintained. It may increase, but it must never diminish. Here is that special aspect of design which we call construction, or plot. By interest I mean the interest of the story itself, and not the interest of the continual play of the author's mind on his material. In proportion as the interest of the story is maintained, the plot is a good one. In so far as it lapses, the plot is a bad one. There is no other criterion of good construction. Readers of a certain class are apt to call good the plot of that story in which "you can't tell what is going to happen next." But in some of the most tedious novels ever written you can't tell what is going to happen next—and you don't care a fig what

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is going to happen next. It would be nearer the mark to say that the plot is good when "you want to make sure what will happen next"! Good plots set you anxiously guessing what will happen next.

When the reader is misled—not intentionally in order to get an effect, but clumsily through amateurishness—then the construction is bad. This calamity does not often occur in fine novels, but in really good work another calamity does occur with far too much frequency—namely, the tantalizing of the reader at a critical point by a purposeless, wanton, or negligent shifting of the interest from the major to the minor theme. A sad example of this infantile trick is to be found in the thirty-first chapter of *Rhoda Fleming*, wherein, well knowing that the reader is tingling for the interview between Roberts and Rhoda, the author, unable to control his own capricious and monstrous fancy for Algernon, devotes some sixteen pages to the young knave's vagaries with an illicit thousand pounds. That the sixteen pages are excessively brilliant does not a bit excuse the wilful unshapeliness of the book's design.

The Edwardian and Georgian out-and-out defenders of Victorian fiction are wont to argue that though the event-plot in sundry novels may be loose and casual (that is to say, simply careless), the 'idea-plot' is usually close-knit, coherent, and logical. I have never yet been able to comprehend how an idea-plot can exist independently of an event-plot (any more than how spirit can be conceived apart from matter); but assuming that an idea-plot can exist independently, and that the mysterious thing is superior in form to its coarse fellow, the event-plot (which I positively

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do not believe)—even then I still hold that sloppiness in the fabrication of the event-plot amounts to a grave iniquity. In this connection I have in mind, among English novels, chiefly the work of "Mark Rutherford," George Eliot, the Brontës, and Anthony Trollope.

The one other important rule in construction is that the plot should be kept throughout within the same convention. All plots—even those of our most sacred naturalistic contemporaries—are and must be a conventionalization of life. We imagine we have arrived at a convention which is nearer to the truth of life than that of our forerunners. Perhaps we have—but so little nearer that the difference is scarcely appreciable! An aviator at midday may be nearer the sun than the motorist, but, regarded as a portion of the entire journey to the sun, the aviator's progress upward can safely be ignored. No novelist has yet, or ever will, come within a hundred million miles of life itself. It is impossible for us to see how far we still are from life. The defects of a new convention disclose themselves late in its career. The notion that 'naturalists' have at last lighted on a final formula which ensures truth to life is ridiculous. 'Naturalist' is merely an epithet expressing self-satisfaction.

Similarly, the habit of deriding as 'conventional' plots constructed in an earlier convention is ridiculous. Under this head Dickens in particular has been assaulted; I have assaulted him myself. But, within their convention, the plots of Dickens are excellent, and show little trace of amateurishness, and every sign of skilled accomplishment. And Dickens did not blunder out of one convention into another, as certain

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of ourselves undeniably do. Thomas Hardy, too, has been arraigned for the conventionalism of his plots. And yet Hardy happens to be one of the rare novelists who have evolved a new convention to suit their idiosyncrasy. Hardy's idiosyncrasy is a deep conviction of the whimsicality of the divine power, and again and again he has expressed this with a virtuosity of skill which ought to have put humility into the hearts of naturalists, but which has not done so. The plot of *The Woodlanders* is one of the most exquisite examples of subtle symbolic illustration of an idea that a writer of fiction ever achieved; it makes the symbolism of Ibsen seem crude. You may say that *The Woodlanders* could not have occurred in real life. No novel could have occurred in real life. The balance of probabilities is incalculably against any novel whatsoever, and rightly so. A convention is essential, and the duty of a novelist is to be true within his chosen convention, and not further. Most novelists still fail in this duty. Is there any reason, indeed, why we should be so vastly cleverer than our fathers? I do not think we are.

Leaving the seductive minor question of ornamentation, I come lastly to the question of getting the semblance of life on to the page before the eyes of the reader—the daily and hourly texture of existence. The novelist has selected his subject; he has drenched himself in his subject. He has laid down the main features of the design. The living embryo is there, and waits to be developed into full organic structure. Whence and how does the novelist obtain the vital tissue which must be his material? The answer is that he digs it out of himself. First-class fiction is, and must be, in the final resort autobiographical.

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What else should it be? The novelist may take notes of phenomena likely to be of use to him. And he may acquire the skill to invent very apposite illustrative incident. But he cannot invent psychology. Upon occasion some human being may entrust him with confidences extremely precious for his craft. But such windfalls are so rare as to be negligible. From outward symptoms he can guess something of the psychology of others. He can use a real person as the unrecognizable but helpful basis for each of his characters. . . . And all that is nothing. And all special research is nothing. When the real intimate work of creation has to be done—and it has to be done on every page—the novelist can only look within for effective aid. Almost solely by arranging and modifying what he has felt and seen, and scarcely at all by inventing, can he accomplish his end.

An inquiry into the career of any first-class novelist invariably reveals that his novels are full of autobiography. But, as a fact, every good novel contains far more autobiography than any inquiry could reveal. Episodes, moods, characters of autobiography can be detected and traced to their origin by critical acumen, but the intimate autobiography that runs through each page, vitalizing it, may not be detected. In dealing with each character in each episode the novelist must for a thousand convincing details interrogate that part of his own individuality which corresponds to the particular character. The foundation of his equipment is universal sympathy. And the result of this (or the cause—I don't know which) is that in his own individuality there is something of everybody. If he is a born novelist he is safe in asking himself, when in

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doubt as to the behaviour of a given personage at a given point: "Now, what should *I* have done?" And incorporating the answer! And this in practice is what he does. Good fiction is autobiography dressed in the colours of all mankind.

The necessarily autobiographical nature of fiction accounts for the creative repetition to which all novelists—including the most powerful—are reduced. They monotonously yield again and again to the strongest predilections of their own individuality. Again and again they think they are creating, by observation, a quite new character—and lo! when finished it is an old one—autobiographical psychology has triumphed! A novelist may achieve a reputation with only a single type, created and re-created in varying forms. And the very greatest do not contrive to create more than half a score genuine separate types. In Cerfberr and Christophe's biographical dictionary of the characters of Balzac, a tall volume of six hundred pages, there are some two thousand entries of different individuals, but probably fewer than a dozen genuine distinctive types. No creative artist ever repeated himself more brazenly or more successfully than Balzac. His miser, his vicious delightful actress, his vicious delightful duchess, his young man-about-town, his virtuous young man, his heroic weeping virgin, his angelic wife and mother, his poor relation, and his faithful stupid servant—each is continually popping up with a new name in the Human Comedy. A similar phenomenon, as Frank Harris has proved, is to be observed in Shakspeare. Hamlet of Denmark was only the last and greatest of a series of Shakspearean Hamlets.

It may be asked, finally: What of the actual pro-

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cess of handling the raw material dug out of existence and of the artist's self—the process of transmuting life into art? There is no process. That is to say, there is no conscious process. The convention chosen by an artist is his illusion of the truth. Consciously, the artist only omits, selects, arranges. But let him beware of being false to his illusion, for then the process becomes conscious, and bad. This is sentimentality, which is the seed of death in his work. Every artist is tempted to sentimentalize, or to be cynical—practically the same thing. And when he falls to the temptation, the reader whispers in his heart, be it only for one instant: “That is not true to life.” And in turn the reader's illusion of reality is impaired. Readers are divided into two classes—the enemies and the friends of the artist. The former, a legion, admire for a fortnight or a year. They hate an uncompromising struggle for the truth. They positively like the artist to fall to temptation. If he falls, they exclaim, “How sweet!” The latter are capable of savouring the fine unpleasantness of the struggle for truth. And when they whisper in their hearts: “That is not true to life,” they are ashamed for the artist. They are few, very few; but a vigorous clan. It is they who confer immortality.

*From “The Author's Craft”*

## THE BARBER

I WAS staying in an agreeable English village. And my hair grew as usual. I asked an acquaintance of mine, a chauffeur, for information about local barbers. He replied that there was a good barber in the county town twelve and a half miles off, and that there was no other. Discouraged, I put the inconvenient matter aside, hoping, as one does of an inconvenient matter, that in some mysterious way time would purge it of its inconvenience. But my hair kept on inexorably growing, growing. No shutting of my eyes, no determination not to be inconvenienced, would stop it. My hair was as irresistible as an avalanche or as the evolution of a society. I foresaw the danger of being mistaken on the high road for a genius, and I spoke to the chauffeur again. He repeated what he had said. "But," I protested, "there are fifteen hundred people living within a couple of miles of this spot. Surely they don't all travel twelve and a half miles to get their hair cut!" He smiled. Oh, no! A barber's shop existed in the hinterland of the village. "But it would be quite impossible for you, sir. Quite impossible!" His tone was convinced. An experienced gardener confirmed his judgment with equal conviction. I accepted it. The chasms which separate one human being from another are often unsuspected and terrible. Did the chauffeur submit himself to the village barber? He did not. The gardener did, but not the chauffeur. The chauffeur, I learnt, went to the principal barber's at X, a seaside resort about four miles off. Being a practically

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uneducated man, incapable even of cutting my own hair, and thus painfully dependent on superiors in skill, I was bound to yield somehow in the end, and I compromised. Travel twelve miles and a half for so simple an affair I would not. But I would travel four. "Couldn't I go to the barber's at X?" I asked. The chauffeur, having reflected, admitted that perhaps I might. And after a few moments he stated that the place was clean, and indeed rather smart.

X is a very select resort, and in part residential. It has a renowned golf-links, many red detached houses with tennis-lawns, many habitable bathing-cabins, two frigid and virtuous hotels, and no pier or band. In summer it is alive with the gawky elegance of upper-class Englishwomen, athletic or maternal. But this happened in the middle of winter. The principal barber's was in the broad main street, and the front shop was devoted to tobacco. I passed into the back shop, a very small room. The barber was shaving another customer. He did not greet me, nor show by any sign that my arrival had reached his senses. A small sturdy boy in knickers, with a dirty white apron too large for him, grinned at me amicably. When I asked him: "Is it you who are going to operate on me?" he grinned still more and shook his head. I was relieved. The shabby room, though small, was very cold. A tiny fire burned in the grate; and the grate, in this quite modern back shop, was such as one finds in servants' bedrooms—when servants' bedrooms have any grate at all. Clean white curtains partially screened a chilly French window that gave on to a backyard. The whiteness of these curtains and of three marble wash-basins gave to the room an aspect

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of cleanliness which had deceived the chauffeur's simplicity. The room was not clean. Thick dust lay on the opaline gas-shades, and the corners were full of cobwebs. A dirty apron and a cap hung on a nail in one corner. In another was a fitment containing about fifteen heavy mugs and shaving-brushes, numbered. The hairbrushes were poor. The floor was of unpolished dirty planks, perhaps deal. There was no sign of any antiseptic apparatus. I cannot say that I was surprised, because in England I already knew of towns of thirty-five to forty thousand inhabitants, not to mention vast metropolitan suburbs, without a single barber's shop that is not slatternly, dirty, and inadequate in everything except the sharpness of the razors. But I was disappointed in the chauffeur, whom I had deemed to be a bit of a connoisseur. The truth was that the chauffeur had imposed himself on me as a Grenadier on a nurse-girl. However, I now knew that chauffeurs are not necessarily what they seem.

I stood as close as I could with my back to the tiny fire, and glanced through the pages of the *Daily Mirror*. And while I waited I thought of all the barbers in my career. I am interested in barbers. I esteem haircutting, a very delicate and intimate experience, and one, like going out to dinner, not to be undertaken lightly. I said once to a barber in Guernsey: "That's the first time I've ever been shaved!" I was proud of my sang-froid. He answered grimly: "I thought so, sir." He silenced me; but the fellow had no imagination. I bring the same charge against most New York barbers, who, rendered callous by the harsh and complex splendour of their catacombs, take hold of your head as if it was your foot, or perhaps

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a detachable wooden sphere. I like Denmark because there some of the barbers' shops have a thin ascending jet of water whose summit just caresses the bent chin, which, after shaving, is thus laved without either the repugnant British sponge or the clumsy splashing practised in France and Italy. French barbers are far better than English. They greet you kindly when you enter their establishments and invariably create in you the illusion that you will not have to wait. I knew well a fashionable barber in Paris, and in his shop I reclined generally between a Count and a Marquis. This prevalence of the nobility amazed and pleased me until one day the barber addressed me as "Monsieur le Marquis." He made a peer, but lost a customer. For years I knew very well indeed the sole barber of a small French village. This man was in his excellent shop fourteen hours a day seven days a week. He had one day's holiday every year, Easter Monday, when he went to Paris for the day. He was never ill and always placid. Then came the Weekly Repose Act, and the barber was compelled to close his shop one day a week. He chose Monday, and on Mondays he went fishing. He had been a barber; he was now a king; his gorgeous satisfaction in life impregnated the whole village like ozone. Not every Act of Parliament is ineffective.

Italian barbers are greater than French, both in quality and in numbers. Every Italian village has several big barbers; and in some of the more withdrawn towns, festering in their own history, the barber's seems to be the only industry that is left. On a certain afternoon I walked up and down the short and narrow Via Umberto Primo in that surpassingly

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monumental port, Civita Vecchia, and there were at least ten seductive barbers' shops in the street, and they were all very busy, so that I entered none of them, though boys in white ran out at intervals and begged me to enter. These small boys in white are indispensable to the ceremonial of a good Italian barber's shop. After you are shaved they approach you reverently, bearing a large silver or brass bowl of water high in their raised hands, and you deign to rinse. In that industrial purgatory, Piombino, I found an admirable shop with three such acolytes, brothers, all tiny. The disadvantage of them, however, is grave; when you reflect that they work ninety hours a week your pleasure is spoilt. There are wondrous barbers in Rome, artists who comprehend that a living head is entitled to respect, and whose affectionate scissors create while destroying. Unnecessary to say to these men: "Please remember that the whole of my livelihood and stock-in-trade is between your hands." But the finest artist I know or have known is nevertheless in Paris. His life has the austerity of a monk's. I once saw him in the street; he struck me as out of place there, and he seemed to apologize for having quitted even for an instant his priestlike task. Whenever I visit him he asks me where I last had my hair cut. His criticisms of the previous barber are brief and unanswerable. But once, when I had come from Rome, he murmured, with negligent approval: "*C'est assez bien coupé.*"

The principal barber at X signed to me to take the chair. The chair was very uncomfortable because it was too high in the seat. I mildly commented on this. The barber answered:

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"It's not high enough for me as it is. I always have to stoop."

He was a rather tall man.

Abashed, I suggested that a footstool might be provided for customers.

He answered with quiet indifference:

"I believe that they do have them in some places."

He was a decent, sad, disappointed man, aged about thirty-five; and very badly shaved. No vice in him; but probably a touch of mysticism; assuredly a fatalist. I felt a certain sympathy with him, and I asked if business was good. No, it was not. X was nothing of a place. The season was far too short; in fact, it scarcely existed. Constant 'improvements' involved high rates—twelve shillings in the pound—and there were too few ratepayers, because most of the houses stood in large gardens. The owners of these gardens enjoyed the 'improvements' on the sea-front, which he paid for. His rent was too heavy—fifty pounds a year—and he was rated at thirty-two. Such was his conspectus of X, in which everything was wrong except his chairs—and even they were too low for him. He had been at Z with his uncle. Now Z *was* a town! But he could not set up against his uncle, so he had come to X.

Two young men entered the front shop. The barber immediately left me to attend to them. But as he reached the door between the two shops he startled me by turning round and muttering:

"Excuse me, sir."

Mollified by this unexpected urbanity, I waited cheerfully with my hair wet some time while he discussed at length with the two young men the repairing

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of a damaged tobacco-pipe. When he came back he parted my hair on the wrong side—sure sign of an inefficient barber. He had been barbering for probably twenty years and had not learnt that a barber ought to notice the disposition of a customer's hair before touching it. He was incapable, but not a bad sort. He took my money with kindly gloom, and wished me an amicable good-day, and I walked up the street away from the principal barber's hurriedly in order to get warm. The man's crass and sublime ignorance of himself was touching. He had not suspected his own incapacity. Above all, he had not guessed that he was the very incarnation of the spirit of British small retail commerce. Soon he and about ten thousand other barbers just like him will be discovering that something is wrong with the barber world, and, full of a grievance against the public, they will try to set it right by combining to raise prices.

*From "Things that have Interested Me,"  
First Series*

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